

The treasures of Costa Rica

■ This “rich coast” is worth a king’s ransom in vitality, contentment, natural beauty and a kind of lop-sided humor, but don’t expect a show of material wealth.

By BRIDGET McQUATE

A CAHUITA, Costa Rica stray crab from the nearby ocean wandered into the restaurant, stopped at our table and looked up with two black-dot eyes that seemed to beg for a scrap of food — or maybe he just needed help finding his way home.

He sidled away when we offered nothing. The waiter nonchalantly directed him toward the door with his foot, as if for the 100th time.

My friend and I were the only customers in the restaurant. A thatched roof and open sides let the smell, sound and breeze of the Caribbean flow into the room.

We feasted on shrimp in garlic sauce and a beer called Tropical, all to the sounds of reggae sung in Spanish. The cook, a large Afro-Caribbean woman, and the waiter danced and sang while performing cleaning up.

I remember thinking that this was the weirdest place I had ever seen, but in my travel lexicon, weird usually means good.

Those who aren’t interested in weird may come here instead for the miles of protected jungles lining the Caribbean, for the coral reef, for the deserted beaches — several with black sand and all with incredible shells scattered about — or possibly for the jungle wildlife, screeching and howling, hooting and chirping, all around.

This place, Cahuita (Ca-WEE-ta), on the Caribbean coast of Costa



Photo by Jill Wollack

WATER’S EDGE: The beach at Cahuita Point has plenty of room for wanderers.

Rica, is a special brand of paradise. It just took us a while to realize it.

Earlier that day, the bus from the capital of San Jose had just passed several Chiquita banana trucks and an expansive banana field, when the driver abruptly motioned everyone off the bus. We had no idea why.

This obviously was not our destination beach town, but we obediently followed our fellow passengers, trudging through the mud with our luggage toward the suspended plank and rope foot bridge spanning the river ahead. All around us, loads of bananas on boards whizzed through the air, hooked to pulleys running on cables in a network that stretched across the entire plantation.

We learned later that the larger steel bridge next to the wobbly one we courageously crossed was crippled in an earthquake in 1991 — a 7.4 on the Richter scale. That ex-

plained the mysterious disembarkment. Once across the bridge, we boarded another bus and made our way to Cahuita.

The poverty that greeted us came as a bit of a shock. Weather-beaten and worn-out wooden houses on stilts sit along the dirt road — the only road — into the tiny town. Some of the dilapidation is a result of the earthquake but contributes to the overall depressed look of the place.

Cahuita’s main street is like something out of a western movie — with a cast drawn from the Caribbean and set on Gilligan’s Island. The dirt road is lined with wooden general stores, two tourist offices in small wooden houses, a reggae bar on one corner, another tiny bar and some wooden homes with front porches mixed in among them.

No horses, but there was a three-toed sloth that a man was playing with, by the reggae bar,

where several bare-chested Rastafarians drank beer on the lopsided porch. English-speaking Afro-Caribbeans and some Costa Ricans who seemed to have Spanish ancestry rode bikes and chatted at the main intersection. Reportedly, 3,000 people live here.

Most hotels are concentrated at one end of the main road, clustered around the entrance to the national park. The open-air restaurants and wooden, thatched-roof hotels surrounded by coconut palms at this end of town create a sharp contrast to the natives’ town, only several hundred feet away.

About 10 hotels have sprung up since the establishment of the national park in the late 1970s. They range from plain concrete buildings with basic rooms to grander tropical thatched structures to romantic bungalows farther out of town,

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along the black beach. Room rates range from about \$20 to more than \$50.

The story behind Cahuita's character ranges from tales of pirates, shipwrecks and buried gold, to civil war, devastating storms, cricket games and horse races.

The Spanish conquistadores explored the area in the 16th Century but never settled there, succeeding only in driving the indigenous people into the nearby Talamanca mountains. The first people after the natives to settle in the area were immigrants from Jamaica and other Caribbean islands who came around 1828 to fish, collect the once-abundant turtles and farm.

In 1915, the president of Costa Rica accidentally ended up in Cahuita when his boat crashed to shore in a storm. The people took him in and fed him that night. He returned shortly afterward and bought a portion of land, divided it into plots for the people to farm and created blocks throughout the town. That, so the story goes, was the official beginning of Cahuita.

Soon more and more Afro-Caribbean people made their way to the area after working on the Panama Canal or the trans-Costa Rica railroad.

The establishment of the national park turned a major portion of the Cahuita jungle into government land. The people were compensated for their property, but it meant a change in lifestyle. They were expected to convert from an agrarian existence to a life of tourism.

Today, most of the people who own the hotels, restaurants and tourist agencies are the native Costa Ricans or outsiders — not the Afro-Caribbeans who settled the area.

If the people are resentful of their fate, they don't take it out on

the tourists. If anything, they seemed to be curious about us. The rastas mixed with the tourists every night at the town's two reggae bars. The townspeople greeted us with a "Hi" or "All Right", willingly gave directions and pointed out wildlife (as well as occasionally offering *ganja* for sale).

The main reason travelers come to this part of the world is to see the natural beauty and wildlife of the national park. The four-mile nature trail out to Cahuita Point starts at the beach and leads into a jungle that is home to white-faced and howler monkeys, sloths, lizards, fluorescent-red tree frogs, giant blue *Morpho* butterflies and canary-colored birds — and those are just the critters that are easy to see.

Among the not-so-easy-to-see are anteaters, kinkajous, agoutis, armadillos, boa constrictors and crocodiles. With almost every step we took, small blue land crabs with

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bright orange legs scuttled away from us back into their holes under huge tree roots elevated above the sandy soil.

The trail runs along the white sand beach. Snorkeling and scuba-diving equipment can be rented in town to explore the coral reefs just off the cape.

The beaches in Cahuita and other parts of Costa Rica were so deserted that I initially had the feeling that I wasn't supposed to be there. But I soon became accustomed to the Costa Rican vacation attitude: There's no one watching, and you can do whatever you want

(other than litter, destroy nature or take anything — they search your bags on the way out of most national parks).

One day, we rented mountain bicycles and rode down the nearly traffic-free road toward Panama. Passing through smaller settlements, we could hear the roaring of howler monkeys, the otherworldly songs of exotic birds and the laughter of women and children playing in their yards.

I think it was then that I amended my thinking about the poverty here. The initial shock of it — and the pity that followed — had sprung from my automatic comparison of this lifestyle to *mine*, but the more time I spent there the more I doubted that those people, if given a chance, would trade in humble houses and simple lives in the heart of the natural world. Part of me began to envy that simplicity and the lack of it in my own life.

The eight-mile bike ride down the rocky dirt road to the beach at Puerto Viejo was well worth the soreness. Puerto Viejo is another small town adapting to the increasing tourist trade but is still a humble haven.

The black sand beach and the brightly painted houses and stores make Puerto Viejo a little more inviting than Cahuita.

Other Cahuita adventure possibilities include a trip to the coral reef in a glass-bottom boat, guided nature walks through a Bribri-Indian Reserve in the mountains near Panama, a one-day trip to see turtles laying their eggs on the beach, and tours to several other biological and nature reserves.

This is a place for the semi-rugged and curious. Anybody wanting a relaxing, on-schedule vacation should probably go to Club Med. I'm hoping that Cahuita never turns into one.

■ *Bridget McQuate is a freelance writer based in Philadelphia.* ■

IF YOU GO

How to get there: American, Continental, LACSA (800 225-2272) and Taca (305 358-0066) airlines fly from Miami to Juan Santamaría International Airport, in the capital of San Jose; also, LACSA flies from Orlando to San Jose on Tuesdays and Saturdays.

Commuter planes will fly you cheaply from San Jose to Limon, just north of Cahuita, where buses to the area are readily available.

Buses for Cahuita leave from San Jose four times a day for the eye-filling, four-hour bus trip. The route is a major highway cut through dense rainforests in the center of the country and then along a smaller road hugging the Caribbean coast.

Passengers are treated to a rest stop at a combination food store/casket-making shop halfway through the trip.

Cost of the bus is about \$4. You can also rent a car at the airport or at major hotels for about \$40 to

\$60 a day for unlimited mileage.

Getting *out* of Cahuita proved to be a little more difficult. The bus back to the capital didn't show up for several hours after it was scheduled. We ended up paying a local man with a mini pickup truck a couple of dollars to take us as far as the bridge, so we could find a bus going our way.

Accommodations: There are 14 hotels in the Cahuita area, ranging from basic rooms to romantic beach bungalows. Prices range from \$10 to \$45. Check guidebooks for reservation numbers. Lonely Planet's *Costa Rica* is especially good for basic information. There are at least 10 restaurants with great seafood and Caribbean dishes.

Weather: Costa Rica's rainy season runs from May through November. Costa Rican tourist destinations are less crowded then and sometimes offer off-season discounts. Cahuita is very hot all year round.

Information: Request a brochure or tour information from the Costa Rican National Tourist Bureau in Miami (800) 327-7033.